

Tracing Country Bill's Steps

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HARRISONBURG - On May 7, 1971, a man was found unconscious in his car in Elkton. He was taken to Rockingham Memorial Hospital, where he died about 90 minutes later as a result of a heart attack.

His driver's license identified him as Robert Lee Davis of Denmark Trailer Park in Alma, Ga. The license plates on his green 1962 Rambler traced back to Route 1 in Selma, Ala., but he had a car registration from 1969 that said he had lived in St. Simons Island, Ga. Posters and memorabilia in the car labeled him as music promoter "Country Bill."

Beyond that, no one knew anything about him. Despite its best effort, the Rockingham County Sheriff's Office could not find his next of kin. Every lead deputy Earl Turner followed turned up empty.

Turner found a woman he believed to be Bill's mother in a state hospital in Florida, but the elderly woman was too confused to understand what Turner was telling her.

He located a college professor in Pennsylvania, whose brother had run off to join the carnival some 40 years earlier, never to be heard from again. The professor was uninterested in traveling to Virginia to see if Country Bill was his missing brother.

With no leads on Country Bill, funeral plans went ahead. Lindsey Funeral Home in Harrisonburg handled the arrangements, with the Rev. H. Eugene Baker conducting the service and deputy sheriffs from Rockingham County serving as pallbearers.

Bill was buried in Lacey Spring Cemetery, in a plot donated by Sheriff A.L. Strawderman, and his belongings were auctioned to pay for the funeral. A headstone was placed at Bill's grave, but the death date is not accurate.

Everyone seemed to think that the story ended there.

Mystery Reawakened

This spring, a Massachusetts woman named Tina Peters found a letter in an old box of family mementos from none other than Country Bill. Addressed to her father, the letter referred to Bill's "frail and senile" mother. The letter's return address and 1969 postmark are both from St. Simons, Ga. - matching the registration of Country Bill's car.

Peters had been researching her ancestry, she said, and had come across what she called a "brick wall" - a missing ancestor that no one seemed to have any information on. His name was Charles G. Raymond.

Born in 1906 in Keene, N.H., Raymond lived with his wife, Blanche, in Massachusetts. From all accounts, he disappeared several times during the marriage, always to return.

Peters had found a letter from Raymond, postmarked in Baltimore in 1927. In the letter, he described the train he'd taken from New Haven, Conn., and had said that he "wanted a vacation."

Peters said he promised her grandmother that he'd come home. And he did.

The couple had a child, Peters' father, in 1933, but he disappeared again in the late 1930s to work for the carnival and become a country music roadie. He was never heard from again.

Peters said a lot of damage was done to her family's relationships, and her grandfather was only spoken of when money was short.

The only other record she had was the 1969 letter, postmarked in St. Simons Island.

Peters also said she'd never seen a picture of her grandparents together. Her father - their son - hadn't either. She suspected that Blanche had gotten rid of all of the photographs of Charles after he disappeared.

Burying Country Bill

Glenna Graves, director of the Lacey Spring Cemetery Association, where Country Bill is buried, said that after Tina Peters contacted her, she searched cemetery records to see what information she had on Robert Lee Davis.

"I went looking through the book, but I couldn't find him," she said. After a walkthrough of the grounds, though, Graves located Country

Bill's headstone - on the edge of the Strawderman family plot.

Nancy Stearn, the daughter of the late Sheriff Strawderman, said that she remembered the Country Bill case well. Her father and his deputy, Earl Turner, worked on the case for many years.

"They worked on it for the whole rest of the time he was in office, but they couldn't come up with a link," she said. "Certain things, that was all they could do."

Stearn said she thought that her father had ordered Bill's headstone - and she said he'd likely paid for it himself.

She also thinks her father paid the funeral costs after an auction of Bill's belongings brought in just more than \$300, well short of the \$900 burial cost.

"They even sold his hat," she said. "He had a hat that he wore, and they even sold that."

The date on Bill's headstone says he died May 28, 1971, although he was found three weeks earlier. She said she wasn't sure where the birthdate had come from.

Stearn was sure, though, that the stone had come from Hartman Memorials in Harrisonburg. But the company has no record of placing the stone.

In an email, Hartman's Doug Pence wrote, "From time to time we will 'anonymously' supply a stone for someone who has no family, but we do not keep records of that."

While Country Bill had played a show in Elkton, and locals knew of him, Stearn said, the only people who attended Bill's funeral were the Lindsey family and the sheriff's office.

"People around here only knew him as Country Bill," said her husband, Dee Lee Stearn.

"That's right," Nancy Stearn said. "He was Country Bill, and that's what's on that stone."

Connecting The Dots

No conclusive evidence exists to link the two, but the stories of Country Bill and Charles Raymond bear some striking similarities.

The 1969 letter from "Country Bill" had referred to his mother as a "frail and confused woman" who would soon need to be institutionalized.

Raymond's mother, Nellie Raymond, died at the Florida State Hospital mental health facility in Chattahoochee in 1973.

The Florida State Archives said Nellie Raymond previously lived in Miami, appearing as a widow in the 1940 Miami City directory. She also is mentioned in the 1973 Florida Death Index, listing her burial in the Florida State Hospital Cemetery.

Hospital records show she may have also lived in St. Simons, Ga.

Charles Raymond's Ancestry page said he died sometime after 1957 - after he was mentioned as a resident of Springfield, Mass., in his brother Harold's obituary. No records exist of Charles Gilman Raymond after that.

Lodi Palmer, of the Coastal Georgia Historical Society, had done much of the searching in St. Simons Island, and via email she said that no one in the small island community remembered Robert Lee Davis.

"I think we came to the conclusion that he was just not a family man," Palmer wrote.

The historical society in St. Simons Island said that they had no record of either Charles G. Raymond or Robert Lee Davis, but they too believed that they were the same man.

Peters agreed. She said via email that while she is fairly convinced Country Bill was her grandfather Charles, she hoped to connect them conclusively once and for all. "At least we would know where he ended up."

"Tina asked if she could get a new stone with his real name on it to put there, and I said 'sure,'" Nancy Stearn said. "It'll be nice to get the family some closure."

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- Caption: Nancy Stearn shows a photo of her father, former Rockingham County Sheriff A.L. Strawderman, who donated a plot in Lacey Spring Cemetery for "Country Bill." Strawderman and his deputies could not find the next of kin for the man known as Country Bill after his death in 1971, but Tina Peters of Massachusetts believes Bill is her estranged grandfather, Charles Raymond. (Photos by Nikki Fox) Lacey Spring Cemetery is the final resting place for Robert Lee Davis, who was better known in the area as Country Bill, as donated on

his gravestone. IMG>http://www.dnronline.com/files/uploads/article_images/55bc59f7-ef04-4b23-8460-26310a932590/55bc5a12-b7a8-44cb-a402-26440a932590.jpg p/> http://www.dnronline.com/files/uploads/article_images/55bc59f7-ef04-4b23-8460-26310a932590/55bc5a4f-aa90-4afb-b667-26430a932590.jpg /IMG>

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